

## Art and Death

Interview: Lia Alvear with Heide Hatry

### **Lia Alvear: What is the importance of technology in contemporary art?**

Heide Hatry: Although I am not particularly impressed by the contributions technology has to offer contemporary art, and in fact think that for every benefit there are numerous drawbacks, it is obvious, as it has been at every juncture in history at which technology has affected the course of civilization, that it will inevitably be embraced and will transform art in ways that serve its dictates rather than our own – I mean those of human beings. The genie is long out of the bottle, and the process runs of its own accord. For me, part of the artist's task is to draw the reins on this process, to self-consciously slow down our relationship to the image and make it insist that it is more than just a matrix of colors or shapes, and that it is a locus of meaning. This can be done using technology just as well as traditional means. It's the artist's and the viewer's orientation toward the image that is important, but the tendency of enhanced technology is to make us forget why we cared so much about art in the first place. It's like the way pornography affects making love.

As Benjamin noted in *The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, we are piling up detritus faster than we can sort through it already, and to the extent that more and more advanced technology, further and further removed from the hand of the maker, potentiates this process, it is mainly a force for the destruction of the values that have historically supported art and made it meaningful. It is an intimate relationship, that between the artwork and the viewer. It requires quiet, it requires time, it requires thought. Nowadays a great deal of art itself seems intent on asserting itself as detritus even before the march of history can dispatch it according to its normal laws. The simple reality of the proliferation of images works against the efficacy of art as a spiritual medium. Unlike the work of Cornell, who patiently and lovingly tried to put the shards of civilization back together, we're smashing the icons as fast as we can... and calling it art.

Of course, technology provides more options, more tools, a greater range of expression, new ways of stimulating the senses, etc. It is not inherently bad, but the dynamic it imposes is too strong for most people to resist, and it encourages them to develop in ways that make the very idea of resistance seem silly. These days, I don't think that very many people have the ability to distinguish good art from bad art, including, it would seem, plenty of museum curators, art gallerists, and critics, not to mention artists themselves. This situation is in large part a result of the saturation of the environment with images. We don't consider advertising slogans to be art, and although they are everywhere, we still seem to be able to distinguish between these lesser textual objects or entertainment fiction and literature, but when it comes to visual art we are not so discriminating. I feel like the hangover from the indiscriminate production and consumption of art is imminent, but the general historical trend is not very likely to change, especially given the

inescapable power of the market. It has to be fed, but, as Kierkegaard said of wit, it cannot be created on demand, and if it could it would be repulsive. The kind of art that can be made to serve a demanding market in general is simply not art.

I want to appreciate the fact that technology has given art a global audience and even put the means of production into the hands of many who could never have thought of making it before, but I'm not so sure that my democratic impulses are really laudable. It's mind-boggling how many more artists today can earn a living than ever before and how in-demand art products have become. But in the same way that the god-like invisible hand has typically driven the best products out of the market, preferring what everyone can appreciate and understand, our current situation has not resulted in any apparent advance in quality over the art of many an era in which its production was restricted to a small body of skilled, and often even relatively ignorant artisans.

**Lia Alvear: How do you interpret the beauty in your work?**

Heide Hatry: For me, the concept of beauty is an opportunity to exploit the expectations of my viewers and to transform their perceptions. I like to think of my work on the model of the Venus flytrap: I present an attractive surface that lures the viewer into it, and then the work performs what I hope will be transformative operations on him. Not necessarily as final, nor as overtly violent or self-serving, but slow, visceral, and, I hope, definitive.

My work consciously explores the nature of aesthetic reception. I became interested in the question because I noticed that, at least in the several bodies of work in which I have been using what might be seen as problematic biological materials, the reaction of viewers changed, sometimes dramatically, after they became aware of what the work was made of. In my current project, I explicitly ask and engage the question of how knowledge affects our sense of beauty. I created objects that look like flowers out of animal offal – byproducts, in most cases, of the industrialized slaughtering process. I photographed them using the conventions of art and nature photography to make images that readily invoke a response to “beauty” among the vast majority of viewers. Of course, the objects are not simply recreations of existing flowers, so there is a nagging sense even to the most oblivious viewer that something is amiss with them. This feeling should keep him engaged long enough to determine that there is more amiss than just a general morphological discrepancy. And it is in his becoming aware of what the flower actually is and how that makes him feel that I want to interrogate his notion of what beauty actually is.

The biological and social purpose of even the humblest flower is seduction. My flowers are also intended to seduce, but only to seduce the unthinking into thought and the thinking into imagining. In creating images of beautiful flowers from animal parts that most of us would find impossible to consume (even though we eat the flesh of those very same animals, most of them victims of mechanized mass slaughter, without a thought), I want subtly to remind my viewer that his or her every act of mindless consumption is an

abdication of our moral and ethical substance, to arouse reflection where there had been mere reflex. We want to be seduced by beauty, to permit difficult questions to remain lingering, unasked, hidden behind its veil. I want to rend that veil, to ask those difficult questions, and even to question the complicity of beauty in propagating violence and injustice.

On the one hand, beauty is certainly a universal, and unitary, concept; on the other, it is a social construct, one that changes over time and place. It is utterly useless, and yet it everywhere seems to serve ulterior purposes – though these become less and less ulterior as art has become more and more a simple commodity. The doomed effort to compel these aspects to coincide, or to make one somehow exhaust the other, is at the basis of our distrust of the concept itself, though this very tension is what I believe actually keeps it vital. I try to bring some aspect of the tension into active play in my work.

**Lia Alvear: In your latest project called "Not a Rose", why did you choose to work with organic waste, especially genitals waste?**

Heide Hatry: For some years I have been working with biological materials – animal skin, flesh, organs and genitals – to create art that addresses issues of appearance and reality, subject and object, while delving into topics of personal identity, gender roles, and the moral, ethical, and political dimensions of meat production and consumption. The idea of creating flowers out of animal offal seemed to me to be a great way both to cut through the accretion of social determinants of aesthetic reception and to specifically thematize the ways in which codified expectations play a defining role in what we think of as beautiful, or, for that matter, as morally acceptable.

Viewers typically think my flowers look beautiful until they understand that they are looking at animal organs, whereupon they often find them repulsive. Of course, I am in part trying to incite this reaction in order to make people think about why they find certain quite natural things disgusting. I view that disgust to be chiefly a matter of socialization, which work such as mine tries to recontextualize, or re-imagine, and thereby overcome.

The flowers with which we normally surround ourselves are dead detached sex organs from living things, bred explicitly to serve our pleasure, not our sustenance. The animal materials of which the sculptural flowers of the present project have been created undeniably derive from living creatures bred solely to die for our sustenance, but I use only the “worthless” waste products of that process, that is, they serve no, or only an incidental, role in alimentation – tails, claws, ears, eyes, mouths, tongues, lungs, hearts, stomachs, intestines, bladders and, yes, sex organs as well. Their presence excites abhorrence in us, while that of the defiled plant confers joy. In disguising the animal parts as flowers, I’m first alluding to the ways in which we conceal the destruction of animals in the many products almost all of us use without ever thinking much that these were sentient creatures, and in using parts that make it clear that something horrific has happened to their bodies, I’m urging the viewer to think about what it means to use them

the way we do – for what nowadays amounts to our pleasure, since we do not require them for sustenance. We turn them into waste in more ways than one.

**Lia Alvear: How is your work related to life and death?**

Heide Hatry: I love being alive. I hate the idea of something alive not being alive anymore. When I hold the skin or the organs of an animal that has been killed for us to eat, I feel the poignancy of its futile life the way I imagine Nietzsche did as he embraced the beaten horse. I see the beauty that has been spurned, degraded, abused, and misunderstood. I furiously want to stitch it back together, as if I could reanimate it with my passion – like an insane mother whose child has died. In case I actually sound insane, I understand that death is the cost of life, I just don't like the idea of anyone paying it one minute sooner than he must or of anyone paying it if it is not necessary. In using dead animals or parts of dead animals in my art, I feel that I am honoring the beings they were and somehow redeeming their deaths, making them part of something living, giving them a place in a vital dynamic that might profoundly affect another living being, even in a way that might result in saving lives, but at the very least in enriching them.

The dialectic of life and death is central to my work. And I certainly want my viewer to be thinking about life and death and, in particular, violence, notably the kinds of violence, including its subtler forms, that support the peaceful existence of the vast majority of us in the West. Violence against inconvenient regimes abroad, violence against the innocent citizens of countries in which we are tending our business interests, violence against women, and the mechanized violence against the “lesser” sentient beings we slaughter in droves for food, clothing, cosmetics, medicine, etc. As a child I lived on a large-scale industrial pig farm. Every day I was awakened by the sound of the wailing of the pigs that were being collected for slaughter. I would hold my ears and cry along with them, these animals with whom I lived, even though our relationship was hardly that of husbandman to herd. I do not fear death, and I am not interested in instilling such a fear in anyone else, but I nevertheless want my viewer to feel something of the same visceral panic I felt as a child and a youth when these helpless animals were bleating beneath my bedroom window at dawn. I want us to recognize that the cost of our everyday life is also someone or something's death, and that perhaps that need not be the case.